

Decadence and Rebirth of “Kosodate,” Childhood Education

By Corinne Bret

At the end of a long stay in Japan, the eminent psychologist Bruno Bettelheim wrote in his work “A Good Enough Parent” published in 1987 that he was very impressed by the attitude of Japanese mothers toward their children. While a Western mother imposes discipline by giving orders like “Don’t do that!”, “Stop!”, “That’s enough!”, the Japanese mother rigorously refrains from telling her child what he or she should do. To a child who refuses to eat she will say: “What are these carrots that grew so that you could eat them going to think if you refuse?” Control is based on parental authority in Western culture, and on the child’s own ability to reason in Japan according to Bettelheim. An attitude stimulated by this major cultural parameter among the Japanese for losing face is one of the worst things that can happen to an individual.

The opinion of the general populace regarding a child’s behavior, and the patience of Japanese mothers play, according to the psychologist, “a very important role in the acquisition by the child of self-discipline.” During his stay, he never saw a child cry, fight with a classmate, nor be told off by his parents. And according to him, this particular aspect of parental authority would explain the superior scholastic results of Japanese children compared to American children...

Did Bruno Bettelheim during his stay visit only experimental nursery and (junior, senior, high) schools, did he only meet exemplary mothers? He doesn’t mention a single instance, that both the specific and general press have been decrying for the past ten years, of the so-called good scholastic results—based on a marking system which places more emphasis on the result than on content, which is hiding in reality a huge lack of understanding



Do all Japanese mothers talk to their children?

of the substance of the subjects; that in public places — citing by comparison the good behavior of young Westerners — the youth of Japan are obnoxious; that fathers are too absent from the home and mothers too focused on scholastic success, and having abandoned their parental authority to the school teacher, have become lax, incapable and have lost contact with their children...

In brief, the debacle of the Japanese educational system combined with the incompetence and abdication of the parents is in the midst of producing a generation of “otaku,” of very self-centered individuals, indeed delinquents. As regards self-discipline, the stupidity of scholastic rules coupled with the spinelessness of parents produces children incapable of self-discipline, subject to stress and neurosis.

Different reasons, which are becoming more and more numerous, are beginning to corroborate this

pessimistic view of the physical and mental state of one to two through seventeen-year-olds. Young boys harass their weaker peers (“ijime”), sometimes resulting in death; twelve and thirteen-year-old boys stab their teachers, or even a police officer, with the help of butterfly knives concealed in satchels; and, on the other hand, suicides by children submitted to horrific bullying or incapable of living up to the expectations of their parents.

The English psychologist doesn’t mention the gangrene of Japanese society whose origin is two-fold: the education system itself and education at home. However, what Bruno Bettelheim notes in regard to the differences in parental authority between Westerners and Japanese, remains quite accurate. Foreigners always admire the patience of mothers, the attention bestowed on their youngsters. In public places, who has not noticed the smile or few

affectionate words from an elderly person, male or female, directed at a small child?

Up until the age of seven, when children commence their academic lives, they bathe in the kind of warmth described by the psychologist. Used to bathe or would bathe. The past or conditional are more appropriate tenses. For the parents, the mothers especially, since fathers have passed the buck thereby renouncing their authority, have lost confidence in themselves concerning childrearing. Is it necessary or unnecessary to scold a child? Is it necessary to intervene in children's disputes? How many times a day should one change an infant's diapers? The parents' lack of confidence verges at times on total ignorance. But a plethora or rather an onslaught of magazines targeting mothers of each child's age group has hit the market in order to garner positive responses.

The most passionate debate hinges on the question of discipline: whether or not it's necessary and how to reprimand children? Is a spanking an indelible trauma? Those in favor (influenced by the Western model) and those against (always influenced by the best seller entitled "Educating without scolding") clash with each other in lengthy magazine articles and in seminars.

At least the debate is becoming more transparent. One finds the positive rather than the negative side. Enthusiasts of the great Western specialists (Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, Celestin Freinet)...Japanese educators no longer deny the cultural context of the Japanese. The Western model is a reference point, not an ideal as it was not so long ago. Individuality, freedom, the two main themes of the debate are no longer copied, but analyzed, adapted and rendered applicable, as far as that is possible.

This is where we enter into the heart of the debate. Effective childrearing



Fathers may be too absent from the home

is not solely dependent on the mother's patience, a factor underlined by Bruno Bettelheim. For when the opinion of society at large evolves into a "fear of what others may think," self-discipline transforms into a perverted kind of individual attachment to the way society views one to the detriment of the healthy assertion of one's own personality.

Respect for the individual, character, freedom. These words of wisdom should rescue the situation. Probably, in the near future, this will be the case. For the moment, these solutions are being subjected to a modern way of thinking which should make them commonplace. Ordinary Japanese people are in the midst of trying to distance themselves from a gregarious, consensual society — the reverse of this famous socialization of which Bettelheim speaks — for a way of life of independent judgment which would be supported of course by parental authority. As radical as passing from the Stone Age to the Iron Age.

But a hoard of critics of this archaic society, university professors, psychologists, educators, intellectuals

and parents have their own new ideas and observations. Dozens of books are published each month on the subject. Some titles include: "Protection of the childhood castle", "Childhood in jeopardy", "Tormented children, the fault of the parents?", "The domination of the inner-mother", "Children, educate your parents!", "We need to teach fatherhood!"

Japanese psychologists have finally forced parents into the heart of the debate. The attitude of this new generation of parents aged between thirty and thirty-five seems to be focused on a better lifestyle, the crisis which holds up their values for scrutiny so that earning a living or working over-time, would be considered a favorable arena for the expression of individuality.

Already however, we see the commencement of change, as some groups send their 'salary men' home early, making them proud to be obliged to assume their roles as fathers. Happiness no longer rests in business, it is found in the family!

The horizon of education, school and pre-school, is laden with huge dark clouds. But it's not without its bright spots. We will have to wait no doubt for the generation that is now under ten to become teenagers to know if this vague self-analysis and goodwill has been followed by a real awareness of concrete effects. During this waiting period, let's be optimistic about the future of Japanese children.

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